The Advent of the Steam Locomotive in Japanese Literature: The Killing Machine and the Ghost Locomotive (An Extended Version)[1)]

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The steam engine was first put to practical use in coal mines in England in late seventeenth century and, following the improvements of James Watt and later of Richard Trevithick, it was introduced into the textile industry there. The steam locomotive, which employed the steam engine as its motive power, began its first public service in 1825 on the Stockton and Darlington Railway. It soon became one of the most powerful representations of technology impressed in the landscape of early modernity, mainly due to the degree of exposure encompassing unprecedented lengths of distance. Its image captured the hearts of a number of writers and artists as well as common people who saw it. My paper discusses the advent of the steam locomotive in Japan as expressed in early twentieth-century literature—both high-brow and popular—and indicates certain aspects of these literary representations that are distinct from what we generally find in the West, particularly in the United States, where railroad building became a metonymy of the building of the nation.

In the United States, the first commercial steam locomotive, the *Tom Thumb*, ran on the tracks of the Baltimore and Ohio (B & O) in 1830. Within 10 years the nation had more than 400 railroad companies and almost 4,800 km of track—more than in all of Europe—and by 1860 there were 48,000 km of track. With this rapid development of railroads, the steam locomotive spawned at least two conflicting cultural images in nineteenth-century American literature: a positive image as the deliverer of a metropolitan civilization which would change the wilderness into a livable, peaceful environment for people of all social statuses, and a negative image as an intruder into nature which would destroy the virgin terrain of the New World and its peaceful and harmonious order.

In the earliest stage of the railroad in the United States, Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-82) was one of those who created a very positive image of the steam locomotive. Already in 1836, in his first published work of importance, *Nature*, Emerson states:

> Man no longer waits for favoring gales, but by means of steam, he realizes the fable of Aeolus's bag, and carries the two and thirty winds in the boiler of his boat. To diminish friction, he paves the road with iron bars, and, mounting a coach with a ship-load of men, animals, and merchandise behind him, he darts through the country, from town to town, like an eagle or a swallow through the air. (12)

This naïve praise of technology comes to be associated with national pride in his 1844 lecture "The

Young American." Here Emerson considers America's distinctive culture is being nurtured by two forces: technology and geography. In other words, the transportation technology of the steam locomotive he saw as creating a unified network of rails over the vast virgin terrain of the New World. He says: "Railroad iron is a magician's rod in its power to evoke the sleeping energies of land and water" (213), using the metaphor of a divining rod which would indicate the presence of precious metals or water underground. The value Emerson sees in the steam locomotive is not its value as the carrier of people and merchandise from town to town, as he had said in *Nature* eight years earlier. Now he hopes that the steam locomotive will transport "a new and continental element" of the West, bringing elements of nature to the city, so that the people will be enlightened and renounce the values of a commercial society. Emerson hopes American technology, represented by the railroad and steam locomotive, can be a useful tool to nurture the pastoral ethos of the New World in the American of the future, the Young Americans.

Henry David Thoreau (1817-62), Emerson's contemporary who shared various philosophical and literary ideals with him, also expressed his views of the railroad and the steam locomotive in his well-known *Walden, or Life in the Woods*. Although the book was published in 1854, the period in which he lived on the Walden Pond was from 1845 to 47, about the same time as Emerson delivered the speech "The Young American." Thoreau's view of the steam locomotive expressed in *Walden* is not as optimistic as Emerson's, but still never pessimistic. Very early on in the chapter entitled "Sounds" the author sits "rapt in a revery, amidst the pines . . . in undisturbed solitude and stillness," and then adds, "and for the last half-hour I have heard the rattle of railroad cars, now dying away and then reviving like the beat of a partridge, conveying travelers from Boston to the country" (114). Apparently the sound of the railroad cars is part of the stillness he has been enjoying. Presently he points out the importance of the Fitchburg railroad, which skirts the Walden Pond near his house, stating, "I usually go to the village along its causeway, and am, as it were, related to society by this link." Yet this link is also a forceful reminder of the life he had left behind:

> The whistle of the locomotive penetrates my woods summer and winter, sounding like the scream of a hawk sailing over some farmer's yard, informing me that many restless city merchants are arriving within the circle of the town and adventurous country traders from the other side. . . . With such huge and lumbering civility the country hands a chair to the city. All the Indian huckleberry hills are stripped, all the cranberry meadows are raked into the city. Up comes the cotton, down goes the woven cloth; up comes the silk, down goes the woolen; up comes the books, but down goes the wit that writes them. (115-6)

In this way, the quick change from the peaceful beat of a partridge as part of the stillness of the woods to the shriek of a hawk penetrating the still woods is followed by other more serious changes such as the destruction of the country meadows and even an adverse effect on men of letters, although he approves of the efficient distribution of books by the railroad.

Thoreau's ambiguous feeling toward modern technology comes from his recognition that the advent of the steam locomotive is part of the irreversible progress of history, and he does not necessarily

reject every aspect of this progress. He admires the kind of ethos incidental to the railroad business, such as punctuality, devotion to precision and safety, and the confidence inspired by the technology in its reliability, and above all the convenience it provides. How, then, should he act toward this double-faced tool of technology? He states:

> We have constructed a fate, an *Atropos,* that never turns aside.... Men are advertised that at a certain hour and minute these bolts will be shot toward particular points of the compass; yet it interferes with no man's business, and the children go to school on the other track. We live steadier for it. We are all educated thus to be sons of Tell. The air is full of invisible bolts. Every path but your own is the path of fate. Keep on your own track, then. (118)

Thus Thoreau's practical advice is: Know that you live in a dangerous stage in the progress of history, then you are safe and can enjoy its benefits. Probably, in the 1840s, Thoreau must have been one of the intellectuals who would most likely recognize the ecological as well as cultural harm of the steam locomotive realistically. Yet, as has been seen, his views are not so negative. Rather, he accepts this modern technology as it is and prepares himself by thinking how to live with it and make the most of it.

At this point, I would like to introduce what another intellectual of the time, Daniel Webster (1787-1852), had to say about the steam locomotive. Webster presents what he must have considered a very commonsensical, even view of the steam locomotive, which contains both the positive image of a powerful means of conveyance and the negative image of an intruder into nature's harmony. In 1847, Webster delivered a speech in his hometown in New Hampshire to welcome the advent of the steam locomotive in the area. He rejoices over the fact that he can enjoy as good a fish dinner in the mountains of New Hampshire, where he sometimes sojourns at his farm there, as he does in Boston where he lives. With this trivial fact, Webster is of course indicating his strong approval of the speed and carrying capacity the steam locomotive has achieved. Besides, this prominent constitutional lawyer and Federalist senator speaks of the steam locomotive as a symbol of American democracy as well. Webster movingly reports that his tenants are saying "Our railroad!" and comments, "This is the way the people talked about it.... It is the spirit and influence of free labor, it is the indomitable industry of a free people, that has done all this" (Qtd in Marx 210). The railroad and the steam locomotive in his view are the kind of conveyance which serves rich and poor, landowners and tenants equally. Yet, as an able statesman, he does not forget to listen to the voice of those the peace of whose lives is disturbed by "the thunder of their engines and the screams of their steam-whistles," and who feels the railroad "injures the look of the fields"—the very disturbances Thoreau reservedly complained about. Webster's oration, however, carefully brushes off those "poetic" complaints, advising the audience to be more serious, and ends in the praise of the so-called "technological sublime":

> It is an extraordinary era in which we live. It is altogether new. The world has seen nothing like it before.... We see the ocean navigated and the solid land traversed by steam power, and intelligence communicated by electricity. Truly this is almost a miraculous era. (214)

Daniel Webster's oration emphasizes the positive values of modern technology apparently much more

firmly than Thoreau or Emerson, but all three clearly approve of the advent of the steam locomotive in the nation's landscape.

In contrast, the reactions of Japanese literary figures to the advent of the steam locomotive are quite unanimously negative. After Japan's first steam locomotive ran in 1872, the railroad spread rapidly over Japan responding to the tremendous speed of the nation's modernization. As one character in Natsume Soseki's novel *Sanshiro* says: "Meiji thought is copying within forty years the activities which occurred in the three-hundred-year history of the West" (24). In his 1906 novel, *Kusamakura* (English Translation: *The Three-Cornered World*), Soseki quite seriously presents a steam train as a fearful, lethal monster. Toward the end of the novel, the narrator/protagonist, after a peaceful sojourn in a quiet hot-spring inn in the mountains, comes down to the town to see off the inn keeper's nephew Kyuichi to the war. Kyuichi is to catch a train in order to respond to the draft call. The narrator sees that here at the railroad station begins the life he had tried to escape by making this trip to the mountains:

> Anywhere that you can find a railway train must be classified as the world of reality, for there is nothing more typical of twentieth-century civilization. It is an unsympathetic and heartless contraption which rumbles along carrying hundreds of people crammed together in one box. It takes them all at a uniform speed to the same station, and then proceeds to lavish the benefits of steam upon every one of them without exception. . . . Nothing shows a greater contempt for individuality than the train. Modern civilization uses every possible means to develop individuality, and having done so, tries everything in its power to stamp it out. . . . Civilization's pitiable subjects are forever snapping and snarling at imprisoned bars, for they have been made as fierce as tigers by the gift of liberty, but have been thrown into a cage to preserve universal peace. (181)

Thus for Sōseki's protagonist, the train, which carries hundreds of people at the same speed to the same destination, is a metonymy of the inhuman aspects of modern civilization. It represents a clear contrast to the life he had been leading as a carefree traveler in the mountains. As the train pulls in, the narrator's depiction of the approaching train is filled with his resentment of its arrogance: "There was a rumbling sound, and belching black smoke from its mouth, a serpent of civilization came slithering its way over silver rails" (183).

The narrator/protagonist's antagonism toward the railway train derives ultimately from what has come about as an effect of modern civilization, of which the train is a symbol, namely the war: "One turn of the wheels, and Kyuichi would no longer belong to our world, but would already have gone to a world far, far away where men were moving midst the acrid fumes of burnt powder, and where they slipped and floundered wildly in a crimson quagmire, while overhead the sky was filled with the roar of unnatural thunder" (183). The battlefield in which Kyuichi is to be placed in this novella is that of the Russo-Japanese War. For the narrator/protagonist, and apparently for Sōseki as well, modernization, which granted the people of the nation the liberty to pursue individuality, urges the nation to pursue its colonial ambition, depriving the people of their liberty and ferrying them by force to the

battlefield by means of efficient modern transportation.

This ominous, supernatural image of the steam locomotive becomes much more realistic in another novel by Soseki, *Sanshirō*, published only two years later, in 1908. In this novel the protagonist Sanshiro visits his friend Nonomiya in the outskirts of Tokyo. Nonomiya's residence is located close to the railroad tracks of the Kobu line, one of Japan's earliest railroads, whose service started in 1889 between the center of Tokyo to Hachioji, in a countryside west of Tokyo. At the time of the novel, the Kobu line had both steam-powered trains for long distance service and electric trains for the Metropolitan area. In Nonomiya's house, the protagonist feels that the sound of the passing steam train is like thunder, and he even feels the house shaking. Thereafter he hears a woman somewhere outside in the distance moaning as if in utter despair, and right after that he hears the sound of another roaring steam train. Sanshiro's sudden suspicion proves true: he overhears that someone has been run over by the train. He rushes to the spot:

> The men stood mute, holding the lanterns high. Sanshiro looked down without a word. In the circle of light lay part of a corpse. The train had made a clean tear from the right shoulder, beneath the breast, to the left hip, and it had gone on, leaving this diagonal torso in its path. The face was untouched. It was a young woman. (44)

Soseki was not exceptional in presenting such a hostile, ominous image of the steam locomotive in his creative works. Another contemporary writer, Mori Ōgai wrote the novel *Seinen* in 1910 with the same Bildungsroman theme as that of *Sanshiro,* almost as its parody, and he did not fail to include an episode of a woman killed by a steam-powered train.

Another instance of a fatal accident involving the steam locomotive is seen in Tayama Katai's probably most well-known novel *Futon* (1907), published around the time of the two novels by Soseki and Ōgai. In *Futon,* the young female character Yoshiko, with whom the middle-aged protagonist is infatuated, is boarding at his sister's house. It is located again along the Kobu line, whose freight trains are described as suddenly intruding into the quiet domestic life with a roar and a rumbling of the ground. When Yoshiko's father visits her from the countryside, he tells her and the protagonist about the explosion of the steam locomotive pulling his train to Tokyo, a tragic accident in which two engineers were killed on the spot (82-83).

It is noteworthy that in all three well-known novels written within those three years, a person is killed by a steam train and these scenes of death tend not to have any obvious relation to their main plots, raising the question of why these writers felt inclined to include them. Besides, here the train is perceived by the protagonist not as a visible object but simply as a roaring and a rumbling. It is doubtful that in late Meiji people were killed so often by trains, but the three Japanese authors' perceptions of the steam locomotive are uniformly negative. It is something which the eye cannot capture but which possesses a kind of lethal power beyond human perception.

This ominous image of the steam locomotive becomes more perverse and neurotic in the works of some of the major writers as time goes on. For instance, in Tanizaki Junichiro's short story "Kyofu" or "Terror" (1913), the protagonist suffers what he calls "Tetsudo-byo" (3) or "railroad phobia." Whenev-

er he gets on the steam train, he starts having a severe headache and shaking of the body, and feels that all his blood rushes to his brain so that it feels like a balloon about to break, or a volcano, or a smoke stack. Eventually, he becomes unable to step into a train. Or in Akutagawa Ryunosuke's "Haguruma" or "Gear Wheels," the protagonist's brother-in-law commits suicide by jumping in front of the train. His body is completely crushed, but only his mustache is found intact sitting on the track in a perfect shape (70). The steam train certainly appeared in many literary works simply as a means of transportation, but the ominous, lethal image lingered for a long time in Japanese literature. In its earlier years the steam locomotive represented an unwelcome aspect of Japan's rapid modernization upon its people in general, while in later years it seemed to represent modernity's uncomfortable effect upon the individual's psyche.

It is noteworthy that this kind of uncanny discomfort has left a clear mark upon Japan's folklore. The Japanese folklorist Yanagita Kunio reports that the same ghost story is found in many parts of Japanese countryside following the advent of the steam locomotive in those areas. The story goes that in the remote areas where the steam train started running, villagers hear in the middle of night the roaring and whistling approaching the village and then dashing through it. In the morning, all the villagers remark to each other that they heard the train in the dead of the night and since it was not the time at all for a train to pass through the village, they conclude that it was the doing of the area's *tanuki,* or raccoon dog (57). As you might know, raccoon dogs are known in Japanese folklore for being able to take on various forms. This ghost story can be considered a clever folk response to an object so extraneous to quotidian experience as to cause rejection of any realistic and reasonable explanation. The whole community shares a hallucination, which strengthens the bond of the people against a necessary but forced change for which they are not quite prepared.

The idea of the ghost locomotive seems to have been quite prevalent throughout Japan and given birth to various folk legends about it. Here I will introduce one such legend.[2)]

When train service has started in a village deep in the mountains, the engineer Suzuki hears a rumor of a ghost locomotive. The rumor is like this. When the night shift engineer is operating the last train of the day, he hears a steam locomotive coming from the opposite direction on the single track. Soon the locomotive is seen barreling toward the regular train roaring and whistling on the same single track. Just before the crash the engineer stops his train. The next moment, the oncoming locomotive disappears in the air. The engineer Suzuki is determined to solve the mystery and takes the night shift. Just as he was told, he hears the whistling and roaring of a steam locomotive beyond the mountains and soon he sees one rushing toward his train. He does not stop his train and keeps on till he crashes into it. But after crashing, his train goes on smoothly as if nothing had happened. When he reaches the station, the engineer Suzuki is told that the front of his locomotive is stained with blood. He is afraid that he might have hit someone and walks back along the track. At the place he thinks he crashed into the locomotive, he finds a dying raccoon dog bleeding from the head and a little cub crying and licking its mama. When the cub sees the engineer, it growls at him baring its teeth and then runs away into the woods. Mr. Suzuki speculates that the mother raccoon dog wanted to drive away

the unnatural monster from their natural environment and feels very sorry he killed her. Yet after a while a rumor starts again about a ghost locomotive. But this time the locomotive is about half the size of the first locomotive. You know what this means.

Notes

1) This essay is an extended version of the paper I presented at the XIXth Congress of International Comparative Literature Association held at Chung-Ang University, Seoul, Korea from August 15-August 21, 2010.
2) The story is taken from http://www.potalaka.com/potalaka/potalaka 284.html. My translation.

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(Quatations from the texts with * are my translation–N. F. T.)